Connections: An Essential Element of Online Learning Communities[*]

Carol Ritter

Barbara Polnick

Abstract

Online learning communities provide opportunities for connections in several ways: instructor to students, students to instructor, and students to students. As online instructors and researchers, we describe the essential elements for developing online learning communities and the strategies we've used for creating these type of learning environments in our online courses.

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1 Introduction

Distance learning has evolved from correspondence courses to traveling faculty members, to televised courses and integrated televised courses and finally to internet or online courses (Pribesh, Dickinson & Bucher, 2006). Barr and Tagg (1995), described effective online instruction as a learner-centered model where learning can take place anywhere in the world. According to these authors, the professor facilitates student discovery and the construction of their knowledge by supplying course content using collaborative, interactive and support-ive instructional strategies. The use of teamwork is emphasized and encouraged and individual competition is de-emphasized (1995). Littleton and Whitelock (2005) extended this concept by emphasizing that online learners need to be engaged in internet learning experiences that provided students with opportunities to

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communicate and interact with each other while developing their own understanding of the course content. Creating and facilitating online learning communities is an essential role for the instructor teaching online (Cradler, McNabb, Freeman & Burchett, 2002).

Students in online classes are geographically disconnected, so unless the instructor creates a virtual community, students may feel disconnected from the instructor and from the other students (Dennen, 2005). According to this author, connections between the instructor and the students need to be established early on to facilitate trust and open dialogue. Because online instructors are not able to perceive student reactions in order to monitor and adjust instruction, they are dependent on strong communication. The lack of face-to-face interaction can sometimes inhibit communication between both instructor and student, as well as between and among students themselves (Lone Eagle Consulting, n.d.). The initiation, facilitation, conclusion and feedback of discussions demand different approaches when used in online instruction.

2 Online Learning Communities

An online learning community provides for all students to be connected by participating in a classroom where students are valued and respected and a climate of trust and acceptance is established. Each class member is free to take risks in the process of comprehending the course content. Personal relationships are valued and opinions are respected (Allen, 2000).

Connections for students include the ability to actively engage in group assignments using help from other students while working to see the common themes across the courses. Faculty connections include guiding projects and assessing progress, emphasizing commonalities between courses and coordinate, design and plan with other faculty. Students are encouraged to share their experiences, knowledge and aspirations, react, respond and critique others' ideas. Responsibility for students is to view themselves as responsible, self-motivated learners engaged in reflective writing and to communicate regularly with the professor (DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006).

In an online classroom community, students feel that they are connected to one another through mutual trust. They belong and they matter to one another. The class members feel that their needs will be met through their shared commitment to one another. Students feel they belong, are accepted by the group and develop friendships with members of the group. Class members trust each other and respond to each other in supportive ways (Rovai, 2001). According to Palloff and Pratt (1999), human needs play a large part in the way communities are formed. The needs of the faculty and the students are the main reason that the electronic communities are formed. Also, these educational communities can be more stimulating because people meet who have common interests.

Learning communities provide for a deeper understanding of the subject matter through the discussions and interactions with members of the class. It is also shown that students must feel an affiliation with the university in order to be successful students. Because of the fact that online students never visit the ivy covered walls, it is imperative that they make connections that connect them to the university. The use of academic discourse, challenging curriculum and the acceptance to formulate and sharing of ideas, encourages students to persist to complete their degrees (Santovec, 2004).

According to Rovai (2001), there are four components of classroom community. They are spirit, trust, interactions and learning. Spirit is the feeling of belonging, acceptance, friendship, and of group identity. Trust is that the community can be trusted and they feel safe to speak openly and the community will respond in supportive ways. Interaction is the belief that closeness and mutual benefit result from working together to complete the goal. Learning is the feeling that the community actively worked together to construct meaning and understanding of the course content. Rovai found that learning can be enhanced due to the work of the members of the community.

According to Allen (2000), when a classroom learning community is developed, "it is a thing of beauty. The class becomes more inclusive and builds a sense of unity. Students and teachers get to know each other and feel safe to express themselves, disagree, and even be vulnerable to one another" (p. 1).

3 Creating Learning Communities

The creation of online learning communities requires careful planning and course management strategies in order for students to interact on a complex level. Constant communication and interaction with students is essential to this process. In addition, the professor must plan activities that provide for student inter-action, provide stimulating materials for discussions, keep the learning center organized and hold students accountable for assignment deadlines (Nussbaum-Beach, 2007).

When creating an online classroom community, time must first be set aside to ensure that students and professor get to know each other on a personal level. This helps to establish trust in the classroom and it allows the class members and the professor to accept the class members for who they are as people (Allen, 2000).

Curtis (2004) found that threaded discussions with social interactions replace some of what was lost face-to-face. According to Caverly and MacDonald (2002), much of the success of online communities comes from the use of online threaded discussions. These are productive because of the time students are given to think out their discussions and the use of cooperative grouping. Researchers (Schlosser, Estes, Polnick, & Irby, 2006; Center for Excellence in Teaching, 2000) found the use of clear grading guidelines to be a valuable tool for enhancing the interaction of online discussions. Both consistency and clarity with quality and quantity guidelines are needed for students to know how to be successful in a discussion (2006; 2000). According to Aviv (2000), asynchronous threaded discussions, if coordinated properly provide for students to help one another to reach a goal, encourage students to support one another; have a great desire to be successful and create positive interpersonal relationships when group members interact with each other for assistance, encouragement, acceptance and caring so that the individual student is successful if the group is successful. This positive learning climate allows students to move from being academic outsiders to active participants in their academic learning.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) found that the use of collaborative learning was essential when creating a learning community. The use of collaborative learning allowed students to actively be engaged in creating meaning of their knowledge. They also were encouraged and empowered to become experts at their own learning.

Role of the online instructor. Collins and Berge (1996) identified four essential categories which must be established by the online instructor. These four categories are pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. The pedagogical involves the art of teaching the class. This is the facilitation of both course content and the online structure of the course. This includes the actual delivery of the course information using a facilitator model. According to these authors, this is the most important role due to the fact that it involves both the course content and delivery. Collins and Berge found that throughout the process, the professor should be the facilitator of knowledge and uses questions to develop the student's deep knowledge of the content, including development of goals, objectives and activities.

Creating a friendly social class climate where students can connect with the professor and one another is essential for successful learning. This is created by establishing relationships, validating student input, and developing opportunities for students to develop group cohesiveness. Additional responsibilities include maintaining the group unit in order for students to work together toward a mutual goal (Collins & Berge, 1996). This is the essential element in developing a virtual community. Most inline instructors set the stage at the beginning of the course by taking time for introductions for students and professor to get to know one another. In addition, some professors make a space in the course where students can share what is going on in their lives. Some professors title these spaces Cyberspace Sandbox, the Coffee House or the Lounge (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). From sharing their individual information, students can make connections and find other students with similar interests Aune, 2002).

If time for introductions and personal information is not exchanged, the class climate becomes one of a clinical sterile atmosphere where computers take precedence over the people. Students feel they are only a number in the classroom and their work does not matter. Students will then not share and do not trust one another. The development of trust is essential to the development of community (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Role of the manager. The role of manager involves developing the course, timelines, procedural rules, decision-making norms. These are the organization of the class procedures or "How we do things here."

The establishment of class norms is crucial to establishing the learning community. This is done through the discussions of goals, ethics, liabilities, communication styles and expectations. Additional managerial responsibilities include posting the syllabus, developing guidelines for group discussions, facilitating the course information and evaluation of the course material (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Clear communication of expectations using consistent guidelines is essential for online courses. This is important due to the fact that misunderstanding procedures and course material can be cleared up quickly in a face-to-face class, while the misunderstanding of the material can fester for days or even weeks in an online class (Aune, 2002). Throughout the community building process these norms are accepted and become patterns of practice for members of the community. The participation of all class members is an expression of a community membership norm (Berry, 2006).

Faculty must have technology training and continued support in order to be proficient with the technology. They must feel comfortable with the technology in order to guide their students. The way students receive information and understand content online must be acknowledged throughout the learning process. The way learning is acquired online and is different from a face-to-face class should be discussed. Students should have a place where they can discuss their frustrations in using the technology and celebrate their successes with the technology. This is more that a mastery of the computer and the software. It is an awareness of the impact that technology has on the form of learning and the learning process (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Role of the learner. The successful online learner is active and engaged. According to Palloff & Pratt, (1999) there are three roles of the learner. These roles are knowledge generation, collaboration, and process management. While the role of the professor is to facilitate the learning, it is the role of the learner to use the course information in a meaningful way. Learners are responsible for actively problem solving their knowledge on a complex level by viewing problems from a number of perspectives and producing the preferred leaning outcome for the course. In addition, students should search for additional resources they can use to solve these problems successfully. A sense of community must exist before collaboration can occur (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). It is the basis for collaboration with other class members that is an essential part of the knowledge generation. Students should work together to solve problems and complete class activities. Research of additional materials should be shared with the group. Students should be encouraged to meet using additional media of their choice, such as telephone, text messaging and email (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Students should be able to manage their learning process. They should be active learners who keep the course discussions in line, speak out if they are upset or uncomfortable and share opinions. Professors should remain flexible and open to student feedback and adapt and adjust learning opportunities as the semester progresses. Students should be able to speak out without repercussions and professors must facilitate and give up control of their classrooms (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

4 Summary

Connections are critical in developing online environments that engage students in both critical thinking and interactive dialogue. When students are not geographically connected, as in the case of online courses, online learning communities can provide the positive learning environment for helping students succeed. Online communities are established by both the instructor and the students. Instructors establish learning communities by taking the time to connect with their students and facilitate cohesive networks among and between students. They create and engage in experiences that help to build trust in virtual community settings. They design both social and content related assignments that connect students to each other in an interdependent, yet supportive environment. Students begin to interact on progressively complex levels throughout the course and in so doing, are able to process content at higher levels of depth and complexity. As active participants in their own learning, students become encouragers to others, critics of their own and others' work and facilitators of group problem solving situations. All of which are essential components of online learning communities. In this article, we discuss the importance of building learning communities to enhance connectivity in online classrooms, the characteristics of these learning communities, ways instructors can build and facilitate online connections, and the roles both instructors and students play in creating a positive classroom culture.

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[2]http://lone-eagles.com/curr2.htm